women

The Women of Liberia

By Agnes McAllister

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ORK for women in Africa is most important. First, because the women far outnumber the men: second, because the women exert a great influence over the men. The parents cannot tell whether they like their boys or their girls best, and there is just as much rejoicing over the coming of a daughter as over that of a son. This is unusual in many heathen countries, for the birth of a daughter is considered a misfortune, even a calamity.

African children are dearly loved and cared for as well as their parents know how. A mother is considered lazy if she does not attend to her home duties when her babe is but a few hours old. When the babe is ten or fifteen days old, she puts it on her back and carries it away to the farm, when she goes to care for her vegetables and rice, or, it may be, to the forest in the scorching sun or rain, to cut firewood and carry it home on her head.

It is not an uncommon thing for a mother to bring her baby home at night sick, and before morning to see it die from the exposure of the previous day. These mothers consider it a great

calamity to have their little ones leave them, and a woman feels that to be a mother is the greatest joy of her life, and not to be a mother is always to be afflicted.

On account of polygamy, every woman is married, and many of them are betrothed when they are babies, and married at twelve or thirteen years of age. Every mother aspires to have her daughter betrothed at an early age, often while it is still an infant in her arms.

It does not follow, however, that the man who makes this early choice will finally marry this young maid, for, when she is old enough to say anything about it herself, she has the privilege of rejecting him, which she often does. In that case the young man is the loser; for when a man has spoken for a girl, he is at every call of his intended mother-in-law. If she wants fish, she sends for him to go and catch it; if palm-nuts, he must climb the tree and bring them down; if a piece of cloth, he must go down the coast and get it. If she desires beads, perfume, jewelry, an iron pot or brass kettle, he is called and sent in quest of the desired article, and his ability to get her anything that she may want is a proof that he will make a good husband for her daughter.

Sixty dollars is the price of a wife in Africa, which is paid in two cows, one bullock, a sheep or goat, a brass kettle, brass rods, pots, beads, jewelry, cloth, basins, bowls, plates, and many little things that may be thrown in. This is called

a dowry, and if the girl does not accept the man, this money must be returned to him. But all that he has done to demonstrate his ability to please goes for nothing if he is rejected.

The men are the rulers, they appoint a king and chiefs, who govern the tribe, and when they have any matter of importance to discuss, they go off into a cluster of bushes in a secluded spot, talk their matter over and come to a decision as to what they think ought to be done. No person is supposed to know what it is, but the women find it out, and they are interested to know all that is being done.

If what they have heard of the decision concerns them, they call up their head women. The women themselves are organized, and every town has a head woman. These head women meet together, and they also go away into a cluster of bushes and talk over the matter that they have heard, and they also decide what they think ought to be done.

It may be the case in hand is whether or not the men will cut a rice farm, which means that if they do not, the women have to support the family all the year by raising vegetables, and of course this concerns the women! They decide what they think ought to be done, and then appoint a committee to go to the king and chiefs. The women go to the king's house and tell him they have something to say and wish to see the chiefs.

The king sends and calls them, and they sit

down either in the house or in the yard, just as it happens to suit them. Then the spokeswoman for this committee, who has her points all well in mind, gets up to talk to them and says: "We women have heard that you men have decided to do so and so, and we have been together and talked the 'palaver' all over, and we are sent to you to say we are not willing. The women of the tribe have sent us to you to say, 'Now you just stop! We will not have it so!'" And this spokeswoman will shake her fist in their faces and talk with all the authority imaginable. And the men stop right there. The woman in our tribe who was considered the best speaker was called "Queede". I have seen her standing in the midst of a crowd of people seated on the ground — kings, chiefs, soldiers and women — and talking to them with just as much earnestness and decision, and receiving as much attention as any man I ever saw.

I have often been surprised at the men changing their mind so suddenly, and when I have said: "What do you pay attention to those women for?" They would say: "Well, you know, those are our mothers, and we ought to respect them, and then you know women have stronger 'witch' than we men, and if we oppose them they will turn on us and 'witch' us, and so for our own sakes we had better do what the women say." And so it is: nothing can be done in Africa unless the women are willing, for the men have great regard for their wishes.

When these women become Christians, they are strong Christians, and the change in their lives is very marked.

We have women who come to us when they are mothers, and have never had a garment on. All they had worn was a little loin cloth as big as a very small hand towel.

Our interpreter's wife, Manna, was the mother of four children when she came to the mission One day I went into our Christian town, Zion, and Manna had her washing hanging out on the line Her husband had brought a vine out of the woods for a clothesline. Near by stood a bucket full of thick starch, and I said: "Why, Manna, what are you going to do with so much starch? It is thick enough for a shirt bosom." "Oh," said she, "I am going to starch *all* my clothes." And she did starch them all, and then took the table out into the yard and had a day of ironing them And you should have seen her husband and her children and herself come to church on Sunday! They came rattling in as if they were dressed in paper.

I was delighted, and thanked God for the effort she was making. Just think of the change that had come to that woman. We have many dear women who can not only cut out and make and wash and iron their clothes, but who are making great efforts to improve their lives and help others They have been truly converted and are living for Jesus.